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ABSTRACT

A survey of the status of language usage in Singapore begins with an overview of patterns of usage of Malay, English, Mandarin Chinese, and Tamil. The function of English as a primary language along with the official language, Malay, is discussed, along with the history of the dominance of English since Singapore's role as a British colony despite widespread multilingualism. A matrix follows that rates all of these languages on: (1) their usage rating using State Department classifications; (2) increase and decrease trends by the year 2000; (3) chief of state use in addressing the populace; (4) use in armed forces, government, court, and diplomatic communications, written and oral; (5) use as a language of instruction or required language in higher education, on the secondary and elementary levels, and in adult education; (6) use in the popular press, radio and television broadcasting, and film; (7) business and professional use, written and oral; (8) use in intellectual circles; (9) the alphabet situation; (10) their status in literature; (11) use in public signs and notices; and (12) the availability of instructional materials and dictionaries for use by English speakers. Explanatory notes give the number and population percentages using the languages, type of alphabets used, and specific instructional material titles. A selected bibliography is also included. (MSE)

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Language/Area Reference Center

COUNTRY STATUS REPORT:

SINGAPORE

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Center for Applied Linguistics
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Center for Applied Linguistics/LARC
Country Status Report
September, 1984
Singapore - 1, Overview

There are four official languages in Singapore--Malay, English, Mandarin (dialect of Chinese) and Tamil. Of these, Malay is also named as the national language, but this turns out to be a primarily symbolic gesture. Despite periodic efforts at language planning to the contrary, English has become the dominant working language in Singapore, as it functions as the primary language in the educational system, in the government, among businessmen, and in all phases of public activity.

Ethnically, Singapore is made up of roughly 76% people of Chinese ancestry, 15% Malays, 7% Indians, and 2% other ancestries. As a result, most of the population speaks a Chinese dialect natively; however, less than 1% have Mandarin as their mother tongue. Hokkien has the highest number of native speakers, followed by Teochew, Cantonese, and several others. Among the Malays, Malay is the native language for the majority, with two other varieties also found. Tamil is spoken natively by many of the Indians, but several other language varieties are found in that group as well. Only about 2% of the people have English as their native language. As a result, less than 20% of the people of Singapore are native speakers of any of the official languages; far fewer speak one of the two most used languages, English and Mandarin. This has the advantage, of course, that no ethnic group is particularly handicapped or favored by the language policy.

The dominance of English can be traced back to Singapore's earlier status as a British colony. In the years since independence, Singapore joined for a time with Malaysia, but since 1965, it has been fully independent. During the period of strong allegiance with Malaysia, there was a campaign to promote the use of the Malay language among Singaporeans, and even after independence, Malay was given the special status of national language to reinforce the close ties that remained with Malaysia (the national anthem is in Malay as well). However, except among the Malays, the language functions largely for ceremonial purposes only. There is a pidginized form, Bazaar Malay, that is used fairly widely as a lingua franca in situations like the marketplace, but this apparently is declining in use, with older residents more likely to rely on it. In the late 1970's and early 1980's, a "Speak Mandarin" campaign was mounted by the government, in an effort to preserve Chinese cultural values and stem the tide of Western influence on society that accompanied the growing role of the English language. The campaign focused both on replacing the use of other dialects with Mandarin, an effort that is ongoing, and on promoting greater use of Chinese in general. There seems to be less concern for the latter recently, since the latest policy decision makes English the sole language of education at all levels, effective in 1987.

Today, Singapore retains a distinct multilingual character, with English serving as the unifying working language in the public domain. The variety of languages spoken is apparent in the media, where newspapers circulate in all four official languages, and radio and television air time is fairly equally divided among the languages, including programming in non-Mandarin Chinese dialects which is extremely popular. Children are expected to become multilingual at school. They must learn English since it is used as the medium of instruction (a few primary schools at this time still use Mandarin and Malay), and they are required to study a second official language as well. Hokkien (the most widely known Chinese dialect) and Bazaar Malay are often used at the local level for communication, but the language of the business world is English.

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Singapore - 2, Language Use Matrix

SINGAPORE

Languages

Factoids	English	Mandarin	Malay	Tamil	Chinese dialects
1. Usage rating*	1	2	2	2	3
2. Increase/decrease	1	2	2	3	2
3. Chief of State use?	1	1	1	0	1
4. Armed Forces/written	1	0	0	0	0
5. Armed Forces/oral	1	1	1	4	4
6. Government/written	2	2	2	2	0
7. Government/oral, national	2	2	2	2	0
8. Government/oral, local	-	-	-	-	-
9. Court/written	1	0	0	0	0
10. Court/oral	1	3	3	3	3
11. Diplomatic use?	1	0	0	0	0
12. Higher education	1	0	0	0	0
13. Higher ed: required?	1	0	0	0	0
14. Secondary education	1	1	0	0	0
15. Secondary: required?	1	0	0	0	0
16. Primary education	1	1	1	0	0
17. Primary: required?	1	0	0	0	0
18. Adult education	1	?	?	?	0
19. Popular press use	1	1	1	1	0
20. Transmission across borders?	1	0	0	0	0
21. Use in radio broadcasting	1	1	2	2	1
22. Use in TV broadcasting	2	2	2	2	2
23. Use in film	2	2	2	2	0
24. Business/professional/written	2	2	0	0	0
25. Business/professional/oral	1	1	3	3	3
26. Use in intellectual circles	1	0	0	0	0
27. Alphabet situation*	1	1	1	1	1
28. Status of literature	1	1	0	0	0
29. Use in signs?	1	1	1	1	0
30. Teaching materials*	-	1	1	1	2
31. Bilingual dictionaries*	-	1	1	1	2

Notes:

Numbers are explained on following pages

? = information unavailable within time frame of project

- = not applicable

* = footnotes on following pages

FOOTNOTES

1. 1983 ESTIMATES, NUMBERS OF NATIVE SPEAKERS

Language	Number of native speakers	Percentage of population
English	45,000	1.8%
Chinese (Mandarin)	2,500	0.1%
Malay	287,500	11.5%
Tamil	130,000	5.2%
Chinese Dialects		
Hokkien	750,000	30.0%
Teochew	425,000	17.0%
Cantonese	377,500	15.1%

27. TYPE OF ALPHABET USED

Language	Alphabet
English	Roman
Chinese (Mandarin)	Chinese, Romanized Transcriptions
Malay	Romanized (Rumi) Script
Tamil	Tamil Script
Chinese Dialects	Chinese

30. TEACHING MATERIALS FOR ENGLISH SPEAKERS

Language	Texts
Chinese (Mandarin)	Cheng, Huang. Say It in Chinese. Beijing, 1981.
	Chinese Lessons. Provo, Utah: Computer Translation, Inc. (computer software course)
	De Francis, John. Beginning Chinese. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1976.
	Dougherty, Ching-Yi. Chinese for Americans (I & II). Santa Cruz, California: University of California, Santa Cruz, 1975-1978.
Malay	Dodds, R. W. Malay. Sevenoaks, England: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977.
	Dyen, Isidore. Spoken Malay. Ithaca: Spoken Language Services, Inc., 1971.
	King, Edward. Write Malay: An Introduction to the Modern Written Language for English-Speaking Malaysians. Kuala Lumpur: Eastern Universities Press, 1978.

Language	Text
Tamil	Hart, Kausalya and George L.Hart III. Beginning Tamil. Berkeley, California: University of California, Department of South and Southeast Asian Studies, 1979.
	Kothandaraman, Ponnusamy. A Course in Modern Standard Tamil: Laboratory Manual, Texts and Exercises, 1st edition. Madras: International Institute of Tamil Studies, 1975.
Hokkien	Bodman, N.C. Spoken Amoy Hokkien. New York: Columbia University Press, 1955-1958.
Cantonese	Boyle, Elizabeth and Pauline Ng Delbridge. Cantonese Basic Course. Washington, D.C.: Foreign Service Institute, 1979. (2 volumes + cassettes)
	Huang, Parker and Gerard Kok. Speak Cantonese, Book I. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1973.

31. DICTIONARIES FOR ENGLISH SPEAKERS

Language	Text
Chinese (Mandarin)	Chi, Wen-shun, et al. Chinese-English Dictionary of Contemporary Usage. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1977.
	Wu, Jingrong. The Pinyin Chinese-English Dictionary. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1979.
Malay	Hornby, A.S. Reader's Dictionary: English-Malay. Kuala Lumpur: Fajar Bakti, 1981.
	Yusop, Abdul Bahman bin. Collins Malay Gem Dictionary: Bahasa Malaysia-English--English-Bahasa Malaysia. London: Collins, 1975.
Tamil	Pope, G. U. A Handbook of the Tamil Language: A Compenditous Tamil-English Dictionary. New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1981.
	Arulrajan, R. Srimagal Senior Dictionary, English-Tamil. Madras: Srimagal Company, 1964.
Hokkien	English-Amoy Dictionary. Taichung, Taiwan: Maryknoll Language Service Center, 1979.
Cantonese	Lau, Sidney. A Practical Cantonese-English Dictionary. Hong Kong: The Government Printer, 1977.
	Huang, Parker. Cantonese Dictionary--Cantonese-English, English-Cantonese. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1970.

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Harrison, Godfrey. "Mandarin and the Mandarins: Language Policy and the Media in Singapore." Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development 1(2):175-180.

Kim, Khoo Chian. Census of Population, 1980. Singapore: Department of Statistics, 1980.

Kuo, Eddie C. Y. "Language Planning in Singapore." Language Planning Newsletter 6(2):1-5, May 1980.

National Book Development Council of Singapore. First National Readership Survey. Singapore: National Book Development Council of Singapore, 1981.

Platt, John, Heidi Weber and Mian Lian Ho. Singapore and Malaysia. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1983.

SRI International. The Singapore Report. Menlo Park, California: SRI International, 1980.

Vreeland, Nena et al. Area Handbook for Singapore. Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1977.

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Explanation of Matrix Figures - a

1. Usage rating, using the State Department classifications
   1: Official language, most widely used.
   2: Official language, not most widely used.
   3: Widely used language, but not official. (Over 10% of population)
   4: Unofficial language used by significant minority (but less than 3)
   5: Unofficial language used by influential minority
      FOOTNOTE: NUMBERS OF SPEAKERS, PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL POPULATION

2. Increase/decrease trends by the year 2000
   1: Number of native speakers will increase in proportion
   2: Number of native speakers will remain proportionally constant
   3: Number of native speakers will decrease in proportion

3. Chief of State use, in addressing populace: YES (1) NO (0)

4. Armed Forces written communications
   1: Only language used in official communiques
   2: One of the languages used in official communiques
   0: Not used in official communiques

5. Armed Forces oral communications
   1: Used on all levels
   2: Used among officers only
   3: Used among multi-lingual NCO's and troops
   4: Used among monolingual troops only
   0: Not used

6. Written government communications
   1: Only language used in official communications
   2: One of the languages used in official communications
   0: Not used in official communications

7. Oral government communications/national level
   1: Official language spoken in national assembly
   2: One of the official languages spoken in national assembly
   0: Not used in government

8. Oral government communications/local level
   1: Official language in local government
   2: One of the official languages used in local government
   3: Allowed in local government proceedings, translated into official language
   0: Not used in local government

9. Court use in written communications
   1: Only language used in official communications
   2: One of the languages used in official communications
   0: Not used

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Explanation of Matrix Figures - b

10. Court use in oral communications
    1: Only official language used in court
    2: One of the official languages used in court
    3: Allowed in courts, translated into official language(s)
    0: Not used in courts

11. Diplomatic use in notes to other countries: YES (1) NO (0)

12. Use in higher education
    1: Official medium of instruction
    2: Unofficial medium of instruction
    0: Not used

13. Language taught as subject in required courses in higher education:
    YES (1) NO (0)

14. Use in secondary education
    1: Official medium of instruction
    2: Unofficial medium of instruction
    0: Not used as medium of instruction

15. Language taught as subject in required courses on secondary level?
    YES (1) NO (0)

16. Use in primary education
    1: Official medium of instruction
    2: Unofficial medium of instruction
    0: Not used as medium of instruction

17. Language taught as subject in required courses on primary level?
    YES (1) NO (0)

18. Language use in adult education
    1: Used in oral and written technical instruction
    2: Used in oral and written life skills instruction
    3: Used in oral life skills instruction
    4: Used in literacy classes only
    0: Not used in adult informal education

19. Language use in popular press
    1: Used in publications throughout country
    2: Used in centrally-based publications with national distribution
    3: Used only in regional and local publications
    4: Used in clandestine publications only
    0: Not used

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Explanation of Matrix Figures - c

20. Language used in radio/TV transmission across national borders?
YES (1) NO (0)

21. Language use in radio broadcasting
1: Language used broadcasting thoughout country
2: Language used in centrally-based national broadcasts
3: Language used in local broadcasting only
3: Language used in clandestine broadcasting only
0: Language not used in radio broadcasting

22. Language use in TV broadcasting
1: Language used in telecasting throughout country
2: Language used in centrally-based national telecasting
3: Language used regional and local telecasting only
0: Language not used in TV

23. Language use in film
1: Language used in indigenous film-making
2: Foreign-language films dubbed/subtitled into language
0: Language not used in films

24. Business/Professional use - written
1: Sole official language in business and professional communications
2: One of the official languages in business and professional communication
0: Not used

25. Business/Professional use - oral
1: Used in trade and commerce throughout country
2: Used in national trade and commerce only
3: Used only in local trade and commerce

26. Language use in intellectual circles
1: Language used in indigenous scholarly publications
2: Language used in formal scholarly discussion
0: Language not used

27. Alphabet situation
1: Established standardized alphabet exists.
2: Alphabet developed, no standardization
3: Competing alphabets exist
0: No alphabet exists
FOOTNOTE: TYPE OF ALPHABET USED

28. Status of indigenous literature
1: Established written tradition exists
2: Literature tradition emerging
3: Popular literature exists
0: No written literature exists

29. Language used in official public signs, notices: YES (1) NO (0)

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Explanation of Matrix Figures - d

30. Teaching materials for English speakers
    1: Wide range of teaching materials exists
    2: Narrow range of teaching materials exists
    0: No teaching materials exist
    FOOTNOTE: SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

31. Dictionaries for English speakers
    1: Wide range of bilingual dictionaries exists
    2: Narrow range of dictionaries exists
    0: No dictionaries exist
    FOOTNOTE: SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY